

Traditional knowledge, co-existence and co-resistance

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which settler privilege lies as the basis of injustice and, consequently, why overcoming this privilege is a form of co-resistance central to co-existence. By looking at scholarly debates around Traditional Knowledge, specifically in the area of resource co-management, the author situates those debates as an example of settler colonial privilege, an insight further developed through a discussion of settler colonialism and its relationship with notions of being an ally. Drawing on examples of land based education experiences and working with Dene Elders, the author analyzes ways in which settler colonialism manifests and can be explored through actions, self-reflection and relationships. The author draws on the Dene understanding as co-existence as a basis for understanding the significance and implications of self-decolonization for ensuring respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Keywords: *Traditional Knowledge; co-existence; co-resistance; allies; decolonization; Dene; Northwest Territories*



Tipi at community gathering place at Colville Lake, NT, home of Behd'zi Ahda First Nation. Author's photo, 2014.

Introduction

This article examines the ways in which settler privilege lies as the basis of injustice and, consequently, why overcoming this privilege is a form of co-resistance central to co-existence. The analysis in this paper has matured through working for and under the instruction of Indigenous Elders and cultural knowledge holders, who share oral histories and Traditional Knowledge (TK)/Indigenous Knowledge. In most cases this occurs in the context of paid employment, for the purpose of combining my technical skills with Indigenous Knowledge, to assist in achieving specific institutional or policy goals. This relationship, for all involved, while primarily transactional, is premised on a trust-based relationship requiring a respectful approach to understanding what is being conveyed by Elders and cultural knowledge holders, to ensure that the information is both correctly understood and appropriately deployed. As a precursor to being able to respectfully approach this work, there have been efforts made toward self-decolonization. Much of this decolonization effort has centered on becoming self-aware of, as well as questioning and rejecting, settler colonial privilege, which is essential to attaining a clear understanding of what constitutes being respectful in both thought and deed. This requirement of releasing myself from settler colonial privilege and consequently disrespectful thought

frameworks and bias is the point at which an otherwise transactional employment relationship takes on a transformative dimension, creating a basis for co-existence.

Acknowledging that settler colonial privilege prevents a respectful approach to understanding Indigenous Knowledge has significant transformative potential at both personal and institutional levels. Protecting and exercising privilege prevents progress toward co-existence, as defined by the Dene peoples I work with: respectful reciprocal relationships between people. Retaining privilege also impoverishes one's ability to be an ally, and to live in a way that allows for co-existence at an individual level. Traditional/Indigenous Knowledge provides an excellent example of how and why it is important to clearly understand how settler privilege can warp institutions, systems and ways of thinking to reflect unequal and unjust power relations.

Traditional vs. Indigenous knowledge

In the early 1990s, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), then led by Sahtugot'ine Premier Stephen Kakfwi, introduced a Traditional Knowledge (TK) Policy. The Policy's intent was to ensure that "Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge" was included to the extent possible in all government programs and services. Fascinated by what was at the time viewed as the potentially revolutionary impact of the policy, I undertook a Master of Arts thesis examining how TK was being adopted – focusing on the departments of what were then Health and Renewable Resources. At no time did I speak to any Elders during my research or take any steps toward experiencing TK firsthand; however, scientists, politicians, policy makers, and program staff provided ample interviews. My conclusion in 1997 was: while a laudable policy, Traditional Knowledge would only ever truly shape programs and services if they were utilized within Indigenous institutions controlled by Indigenous peoples (Irlbacher, 1997).

Looking back, I think the original conclusion in that Masters thesis missed a couple of significant points about the implications of a Traditional Knowledge Policy. Namely: knowledge is not "Traditional", but Indigenous (or where I live, Dene Knowledge), and the continued use of that mis-labeling, and subsequent misconception, does these knowledges disservice (see Irlbacher-Fox, 2009 for an extended discussion on this point).

Discussions of Indigenous Knowledge have flowed along at least two broad tracks: issues around the content of the knowledge¹, and the context of its use and strategic deployment. With respect to the content of Indigenous Knowledge, I have been exposed to enough to understand that I lack the cultural fluency and belonging central to its understanding. Exploring the context of its use and its strategic deployment are areas far more accessible and open to analysis. In the areas I work in – mainly self-government and land claim negotiations and implementation – the strategic uses of Indigenous Knowledge within the context of institutional development and

¹ I am not going to attempt to define what is meant by Traditional Knowledge. There are many definitions in the scholarly literature. General characteristics include knowledge that is specific, experienced and rooted in Indigenous culture and land relationship.

implementation have been and will continue to be the site of what is, at its core, an ongoing power struggle between those who seek justice, and those who seek to entrench settler privilege as the basis for Indigenous-state relations in Canada.

It's fundamentally about power

Using, respecting, and making space for Indigenous Knowledge constitutes a fundamental challenge to power relations in whatever context it operates. Indigenous Knowledge has transformative potential with respect to confronting settler colonial norms within institutions in which it is used. However, critiques of efforts to incorporate it into co-management institutions indicate that it has been met with a combination of resistance, inadequate implementation, and lack of tools to make its incorporation meaningful. The result is that its transformative power has been, by turns, blunted, undermined or neutralized (White, 2008; Nadasdy, 2003). In the NWT, attempts to incorporate Indigenous (Dene, Inuvialuit, Metis) Knowledge into government programs and services has had mixed success. For example, NWT-wide school curricula require land-based learning about Dene culture, Indigenous language instruction is available in some elementary schools, and several communities regularly take teachers on community caribou hunts. However, this situation is not perfect – particularly in cases where non-Indigenous teachers are responsible for facilitating students' learning about Indigenous culture. TK in programs and services, in this sense, is used primarily as a way to increase awareness of cultural knowledge and practices.

During the 1990s when discussions around the use of TK were new, there was a great deal of resistance and controversy with respect to its use, particularly in the field of resource management, which had been a key element of Dene land claim agreements reached earlier in that decade. The agreements required a shift in power: resource management decisions had to be made within what was known as a "co-management" institutional structure. Knowledgeable Dene land-based experts would sit alongside the scientists and managers to make decisions about the stewardship of "renewable resources" (lands, water and animals). It is within the co-management literature that debates have raged most fiercely, characterized, in large part, by disagreements about the veracity of the content and sources of Indigenous Knowledge (Inglis, 1993; Agrawal, 1995; Berkes, 1999). It is within anthropology, moving beyond the debates within co-management, that the debates are framed and understood within power differentials between knowledges (Morrow and Hensel, 1992; Nadasdy, 2003).

In one sense, these debates over TK were really about whether, and how, dominant colonial institutions could include Indigenous ways of knowing and being in ways that did not acknowledge that prior Indigenous exclusion had been, at the very least, unjust. However, what anthropologists were beginning to notice (though not explicitly articulating) was that, the power struggle over TK arose from scientists', policymakers' and academics' unwillingness to recognize that settler colonial privilege was at the basis of the injustice. That is to say, it is not only colonial policies of the state that led to Indigenous exclusion from decision making, but also

that those structures provided an opportunity for scientists and policy makers to exercise their own discretion (shaped in part by their privilege) to create circumstances in which Indigenous participation or knowledge could be incorporated. So instead of that privilege becoming a subject of collective and personal examination and introspection, privilege was further entrenched within discussions of TK. Within these settings, resource managers, policy makers and scientists launched a TK narrative shaped by a focus on what TK was, and how TK could fit with and positively impact existing institutional structures, scientific methods, and decision making. This somewhat self-delusional definitional and process-oriented turn entrenched settler privilege as the seemingly natural basis for scientists, resource managers and anthropologists becoming the arbiters of TK content and process, defining and quantifying TK as an initial step in figuring out how to best include it within existing resource management decision making institutions and processes – ones that were built to foster and reinforce settler privilege. Ultimately, debates about TK have been and continue to be a political fight dressed up as an intellectual one.

More than thirty years after the first Dene land claim agreements were signed, and the co-management system in the NWT began functioning, the jury is still out on whether the dream of co-management has resulted in Indigenous Knowledge shaping resource management decision-making (Nadasdy, 2003; White, 2008). However, there has been a distinct erosion of the normalization of settler privilege and how it structures resource management decision-making. This has happened not because of resource management institutions themselves or because the privilege through which they operate has been explicitly re-thought. Rather, this has happened because Indigenous peoples have continued fighting for the inclusion of their knowledge, for their ways of knowing to be taken into account. Indigenous governments have begun to restore their own spaces, accomplished in part through their own funding and resources, to promote and continue to develop land based connections, relationships and cultures.

In particular, land claim and self government agreements, those instruments of rights-termination and re-colonization, have actually provided legal protection of, as well as financial bases for, restoring some control and institutional and research capabilities premised on Indigenous ways of being and knowledge. Perhaps even more importantly, in a pragmatic sense, Indigenous peoples have harnessed the potential of land claim and self government agreements in unexpected ways: using money and resources for setting up institutions, places, projects and capacity to promote and develop Indigenous land connections and stewardship of resources premised on Indigenous knowledge and priorities, integrated within a variety of social, economic and institutional tools intended to achieve long term visions and goals.²

Specific examples include the construction, in almost every region of the NWT, of places enabling large land-based gatherings and activities. These often rustic compounds are located on traditional gathering spots, and constructed to comfortably house and provide for the basic food, shelter and personal needs of those who gather there. They often also include structures and

² This should not be read as an endorsement of land claim and self government agreements. They continue to be highly problematic; however, in a practical sense they secure basic institutional and financial resources essential to initiating large scale, long-term and sustained efforts toward creating spaces for land re-connection and relationship between Indigenous peoples and their lands.

spaces dedicated to land-based activities such as drying fish and meat, or tanning hides. Examples of such places include the Tloondih Healing Camp and Gwich'in Wellness Camp in the Mackenzie Delta; Reindeer Station in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, and various lodges and camps throughout the rest of the NWT. All of these places provide ideal locations for short and long-term programming. The Gwich'in have established the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, the Inuvialuit have the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre, and the Tlicho have recently established a Tlicho Research Institute. The Gwich'in, Inuvialuit and Tlicho have also each developed land-based and cultural initiatives, intended to strengthen the vitality of land connection. Each of these represent a growing cultural institutional infrastructure for cultural and land based knowledge, study, dissemination and development for years to come.

Nascent stages of privilege refusals

The debates over TK that play out in board rooms and within the literature on co-management mirror to some extent the personal journey of many non-Indigenous people working for Indigenous communities and institutions, or working within other settings where Indigenous peoples and their interests are present.

It is striking that what is often absent from these situations is an impulse toward, or a requirement for, non-Indigenous peoples to ground academic, technical or activist work within examination of their own settler privilege, or an understanding of how privilege and its expressions can thwart the intention of respectful Indigenous inclusion. As a result, re-inscription of dominant-subordinate settler-Indigenous relations occurs in many forms. A review of literatures on self-government, land claims and co-management, for example, will attest to this fact: in academic work the unit of analysis tends to be Indigenous peoples rather than settler privilege in analyses seeking the source of problems issuing from clashes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests. Redefining the “Indian problem” as the “settler” or “privilege” problem requires deconstructing issues in ways that center settler privilege as the focus of analysis, instead of an approach that highlights Indigenous “difference” from a settler-based norm, which has been a standard approach in mainstream academia (see, for example, Macklem, 2001).³

For those who work for a living on issues where Indigenous interests are central, a movement toward examining one's own privilege and its connections to structures of privilege is not always a given. However for those who identify as allies, understanding one's own privilege and taking action to refuse it, as part of one's own decolonization process, is necessary to be able to respectfully work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Settler colonial privilege is commonplace where I live and work. As theorists of settler colonialism argue (Wolfe, 1999, 2006, 2010; Veracini, 2013), settler colonialism (and its concomitant racial, gender and hetero-patriarchal privileges) is a structure, not an event.

³ This is not to imply that such analyses have necessarily not been useful or in solidarity with Indigenous peoples' interests.

Conceptually, settler colonialism recognizes that while colonialism exhibits as primary characteristics state control over an area of land and the Indigenous populations and resources within it, settler colonialism recognizes that control then produces and sustains a set of colonial social relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples (Veracini, 2013, p. 318) The early stages of decolonization, then, are rife with confrontations with one's own ingrained colonial privileges and the structures that sustain them.

It is important to highlight that being an ally is not a self- or permanent- designation. Rather, it is context-specific, and is initiated and conferred by Indigenous peoples. Being an effective ally often requires decolonizing the self; however, not all allies are at a stage in that process. Being an ally should not be conflated with decolonizing. This distinction is an important one, because often alliances are transitory, cemented by mutual self-interest. Settler allies are motivated to act out of self-interest as much as by altruism or seeking to meet the perceived needs of alliance partners. The content of that self-interest will generally shape the form and sustainability of the alliance. In Tuck and Yang's (2012) discussion of "moves to innocence", some of the limits of allies' self interest are demarcated, as well as the lies settlers tell themselves in a bid to legitimate their own existence at the expense of Indigenous peoples and lands. This may manifest, for example, as settler allies claiming affinity on the basis of their own land-relationship, distant claims to Indigenous ancestry, *etc.* In contrast, the Idle No More protests attracted environmentalists who recognized the potential of asserting Indigenous peoples' Aboriginal rights as a powerful bulwark against potential environmental degradation resulting from proposed laws. Environmentalists saw the utility of supporting Indigenous peoples' rights and recognition as an avenue for achieving specific environmental goals, marking a moment of mutually beneficial joining of interests (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014).

Other allies' self-interests may arise out of recognition of the importance of achieving social justice, or mutual respect, as a basis for co-existence and peace within shared places and spaces. Such altruism is as rare as it is realistic. Generally, a willingness to ally oneself with social justice causes may shift based on local, regional or national events; the sustainability or need over the long term for alliance; and the utility of alliances for achieving self-interested goals. For example, non-Indigenous allies need no 'alliance status' to educate other non-Indigenous people about settler colonialism, an action likely to result from altruism or a commitment to social justice. An example of allies participating in decolonization efforts based on self-interest would be, for example, non-Indigenous women who view western society's woman-hating rape culture as profoundly implicated within settler colonialism, and therefore target anti-Indigenous and settler privilege structures and events as sites of struggle. Their self-interest in securing improved societal conditions for themselves as women, and by extension, for all women, is deeply entwined with a commitment to decolonization.⁴ And while allies can

⁴ To be clear, this is not to equate rape culture or oppression experienced by white-skin-privileged women as equivalent to or somehow as/more important than the impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples. Rather it is to provide a truthful account of how felt experiences of oppression can sensitize the otherwise privileged to other struggles (such as Indigenous peoples' struggles for justice), and read multiple oppressions within a society not as

independently engage in decolonizing efforts in the absence of alliance, participation in Indigenous-led efforts should be at the discretion of Indigenous organizers.

Some allies, in their personal decolonization process,⁵ become frustrated that despite all of the hard work of self-decolonizing, they encounter the limits of their privilege. Conditioned by a life built on presumption of the right to dominance in relation to Indigenous peoples, often allies cannot fathom that Indigenous peoples might not accord them the same twisted colonial privilege in the context of alliance. Allies at this early stage of self-decolonizing may feel resentful that they are not congratulated on their self-enlightenment, or that Indigenous peoples don't appear to display gratefulness on a scale commensurate with their voluntary shucking of privilege. The downsides of giving up settler privilege can be a shock. This is perhaps best exemplified by the "white savior" approach to alliance: a white person voluntarily gives up privilege (social, economic, status), expecting to gain acceptance from Indigenous people in return. When Indigenous people do not provide status or recognition on a permanent basis or in different situations, allies may become upset. This happens in cases where, for example, a group includes an ally in an event or element of an event, then decides that an Indigenous-only space is required for further work or discussion. The ally usually will get upset and question their exclusion, believing that ally status is equivalent to a sort of privilege, an 'all-access pass' to Indigenous spaces or akin to being given quasi-Indigenous status. Tensions can flare as such allies may feel "used": challenging their right of inclusion is viewed by the ally as a transgression on the part of Indigenous people.

I have a personal experience of another dimension of colonial privilege, one I wrote about in my book, *Finding Dahshaa*. It was the first time I was tanning moose hide. Joe and I were taking the hair off of a hide, and we had this moment where I was shocked that the moose's skin is brown, a fact revealed as I sheared off the hair with a knife. "What?" he asked me, "You thought that moose would be white, just like you?" Then he laughed. Loud and long.

The funny thing was that I had not thought about it in a conscious way. The settler does not think through her privilege. She lives it. No thinking required. Of course my expectation was that the moose would have white skin – so completely ingrained that I did not realize myself what my expectations, assumptions, presumptions, were. And are. It's a process. Insidious. Embarrassing. Troubling. This points to the reality that subconscious/conscious privilege can trap well-meaning allies at the unlikeliest of moments. However, overcoming that is possible and the responsibility of each person: we are what we do. Like any other dysfunctional behavior, the

independent events or structures but as a related continuum of symptoms of deeper structural attitudes, structures, inequities, etc.

⁵ In this paper I reference decolonization as a personal process with respect to self-awareness. In this I may be guilty of "decolonization as a metaphor" (Tuck and Yang, 2012); however in order to get to a place of decolonizing action, the privileged must self-consciously first *think* oneself (or self-actualize oneself) to a place of action, the getting-there process being one of decolonization. This constitutes a legitimate and necessary moment between being colonized, and Tuck and Yang's (2012) asserted conceptualization of decolonization.

best weapon against living and exercising privilege, is to harness conscious self-awareness for the purpose of thinking and acting differently.⁶

It is important to realize that being an ally requires consistency. An ally cannot pick and choose checking one's privilege – there is no pass in some situations because one may have been a model ally in other situations. As with all things, consistency reflects a mindset and an embodied reality. This is what is meant by the maxim, “co-existence equals co-resistance” (Irlbacher-Fox, 2012). For the Dene, who I work with, the concept of co-existence is bound up in a notion not of separate existence, but as relationship rooted in reciprocity (Gibson, 2008). Consequently, resisting colonial forces means resisting forces that confer, idealize and maintain settler privilege (and other privileges) that thwart and disfigure the basis of respectful reciprocal relations, as well as the forces that explicitly create injustice. Injustice is generally a symptom of exercised privilege.

Being an ally: It's your responsibility

I will develop this point through another story. I was invited to present at a Trudeau Foundation policy conference a few years ago. One of the Trudeau Scholars asked a question of Dr. Dale Turner, who had been invited to give the keynote. The Scholar was frustrated, complaining that it was hard to make connections with Indigenous peoples at his big city university, and he felt frustrated in his efforts. He requested Dr. Turner give him ideas about how to engage with Indigenous people. Underlying the question was this: how could access for sympathetic white people be created?

This person was clearly sympathetic and, in the larger scheme of things, that attitude is one that deserves attention and nurturing. But underlying this was a presumption that Indigenous peoples had to make the first move, to create space, to provide themselves as a platform for realizing the helping fantasies – the White Savior impulse – of potential allies. It is not uncommon for non-Indigenous allies to require – however politely – Indigenous peoples' energy to educate them on whatever it is they want to know, to be able to help. These nascent allies put the onus on Indigenous people to create a relationship, and to sustain it: by providing information, direction, instruction, making space, and by demonstrating gratefulness for allies' sympathy through word and deed. If Indigenous peoples do not orient themselves to fulfill that need, the well-intentioned allies get upset. Privilege kicks in.

Indigenous peoples are not responsible for the decolonization of allies. They are not responsible for directing, educating, welcoming, or creating the circumstances for non-Indigenous people to decolonize. Non-Indigenous people are fully responsible for learning about Indigenous peoples, about policies that have been used against Indigenous peoples that have been constructed to control and hurt Indigenous peoples and their interests. Most importantly, before non-Indigenous peoples undertake self-education about Indigenous peoples, it is

⁶ My intent here is not to encourage self-analysis to the point of inaction, or center self-analysis at the expense of awareness of and sensitivity to Indigenous peoples, in the context of struggle.

important they self-scrutinize with a view to understanding how, why and to what extent they themselves are colonized. This includes undertaking a careful assessment of the institutions, people, decision makers, educators, and people they surround themselves with to understand the extent to which these are colonizing forces, and how these support white, non-Indigenous, and other privileges.

Land-based learning

The most rewarding decolonizing and settler privilege awareness experience I have had was a land-based education experience. I helped organize some moose hide tanning camps with my friend Janice. After a long career as a schoolteacher and a principal in a small NWT community, Janice relocated to her traditional territory, in part to reconnect with her Dene culture. We met at a moose hide tanning camp, discovering a shared passion for tanning hides and a commitment to continuing to learn.

It was a fascinating and valuable undertaking on so many levels. I was able to utilize teachings of Dene Elders and colleagues, together with other skills and abilities (fund raising and administration, project management), to contribute to an Indigenous-led activity that focused on creating an Indigenous cultural space, with Sahtugot'ine Elders, including Judy Lafferty and the late Mary Barnaby, as tanning instructors and leaders. The Elders we worked with were strict about how the camp functioned and their expectations of the students. Respectful conduct and hard work was required. The result was that we received a thorough and rigorous education in tanning, the norms and expectations associated with it, and a well-developed understanding of our responsibilities and required commitment levels.

Many of the women who participated in the camp claimed to have no knowledge of moose hide tanning. However as the tanning progressed, it became clear they had extensive knowledge of tanning hides. The act of hide tanning would trigger memories of grandmothers, mothers, aunts and cousins tanning hides. The stories they would tell held hide tanning knowledge – and also knowledge about relationships, hunting, bush life, animals, rivers, their languages and cultural knowledge and practices. The women had embodied knowledge of tanning, the lands and cultures, and knowledge that they did not know they had until revealed by questions, issues and memories drawn from them by the hide tanning activities.

The purpose of the tanning camps were primarily to provide space for women to learn to tan, and to connect with each other, the land, and to their relationships with their families and cultures. It became evident that the experience increased cultural and personal confidence among the participants. It raised our spirits in unanticipated ways. It was also, at times, bittersweet, as learning the techniques and experiencing both failure and success broadened participants' understanding of what had been missing in individual and collective lives, relationships and communities.

Learning and being present at the camps provided an understanding of the various dynamics playing out. Early on I realized that, in this space, my presence was often problematic

and at cross-purposes with the camps' intended purpose of creating an Indigenous space. This required thinking about mitigation measures. By the last camp, my main role involved raising funds needed to make the camp happen, put in appearances to conform with funding requirements, and then withdraw. It is not easy to accept that while one's physical presence and input is of value, that same presence may actively jeopardize broader goals,⁷ namely: the creation of an Indigenous space, structured and populated by Indigenous people. In this case, while the idea of the camps had arisen out of a shared commitment between two friends, the camps became bigger than that, taking on a broader significance. The result was a natural evolution, where Indigenous participants took ownership. This situation illustrated ways in which authentic support must be flexibly cognizant of the importance of the broader intent of the initiative; and that personal relationships should not be used as an excuse or basis for lack of settler colonial self-awareness, which can easily lead to overstepping appropriate involvement.

This specific case illustrates the potential for Indigenous land-based education as a self-decolonization tool for settlers, which has the potential to work at (at least) two levels. The first relates to being a non-Indigenous person in an Indigenous cultural space. Similar to cross-cultural interaction more generally, in such a situation non-Indigenous individuals are positioned as students of, and dependent on, Indigenous peoples. This effects a reversal of usual power dynamics encountered within the everyday of mainstream society. The second relates to self-awareness that the reversal of power relations engenders. Settlers placed in Indigenous land-based education contexts are forced to understand themselves in relation to the limits of their knowledge contrasted with superior capabilities possessed by Indigenous Elders and land-based knowledge holders: I don't know how to make fire; I cannot filet a fish; I cannot skin a moose; I cannot read the land; I do not know the cultural rules; I cannot understand the language; I do not know the history of the place... Meanwhile, Indigenous Elders and land-based knowledge holders possess expert skills and knowledge in all of these areas. Transitioning from a position of dominance to one of dependence constitutes an important moment of "unsettling": reaching a place of potentially transformative discomfort. An often completely new and deeper understanding of Indigenous peoples' cultural practices then begins to fill what was once a space of ignorance and privilege, replacing erroneous beliefs with appreciation and understanding. Unsettling thus becomes a basis for transforming settler's self-understanding, and also the understanding of Indigenous peoples and the injustice and privilege shaping Indigenous-settler power dynamics.

The ways in which settlers may use this transformative discomfort can be beneficial or harmful to the larger project of decolonization, and co-existence. Personal relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals are often the trickiest and most fraught elements of alliances. Allies with a well-developed sense of purpose, personal identity and awareness of their

⁷ This is controversial for some, and I have had to take such decisions in contexts outside NWT communities where I have been by turns praised and scolded for withdrawing. I think this is a highly situation-dependent, context-driven type of decision, and this paper does not provide the space to explore it in full. In my experiences with Dene, Metis and Inuvialuit communities and peoples in the NWT, I have never been explicitly asked (verbally or on cultural terms) to withdraw, and my decisions on such matters have always been engaged with respect.

colonial mindset and privilege generally have little difficulty with stepping aside or stepping away at appropriate moments. However, allies who rely on their involvement in Indigenous causes or activities, or attachments to Indigenous individuals as a basis for their identity, sense of belonging or personal or professional legitimacy, may introduce tension into relationships. For example, allies may use their personal relationship to try to coerce Indigenous peoples into “making exceptions”. Specifically, for example, allies using emotional ties to leverage their admission into Indigenous spaces or activities. One of the abilities intrinsic to strengthening authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples is for an ally to be able to accept, anticipate and, in some cases, insist on their own withdrawal from Indigenous spaces. I have found such an approach tends to strengthen authentic relationships and the trust they are built on, even though at the time such choices may be difficult to make, and sometimes painful.

Co-existence and co-resistance

In a short blog I wrote a year ago, I asserted that co-existence means co-resistance (Irlbacher-Fox, 2012). A society based on colonial injustice toward Indigenous peoples cannot, by definition, support co-existence. The Dene peoples that I work with believe that Treaties 8 and 11 are ones of peace and friendship, based on principles of co-existence: reciprocity being the basis of relationship. However, what developed after the Treaties were signed is an existence predicated on a dominant-subordinate relationship between the state/settlers and Indigenous peoples. That is not co-existence.

Maintaining unjust relations, or excusing unjust institutional structures as “historical legacies” that are unchangeable, and benefiting from that injustice, is not co-existence. Living Treaty responsibilities as non-Indigenous peoples requires resistance to injustice as the basis of relationship. Living this social responsibility requires refusal to collaborate in maintaining injustice as the basis of relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples.

This individual ethic of allyship necessarily underpins the circumstances required to achieve co-existence on a societal scale. If co-existence on an individual basis involves self-examination and the consequent actions to resist settler privilege, on a societal scale it would require institutional structures reflecting both privilege-awareness, and rejection of settler privilege-informed or settler privilege-legitimizing norms and practices. Such institutional expressions would reflect the principle of co-existence envisioned as reciprocal relationships by the Dene as contained within their oral histories of Treaties 8 and 11.

Co-existing and, through that, co-resisting requires compassion. Compassion for oneself, as an ally attempting to decolonize oneself, and compassion for Indigenous peoples. No one is perfect. An ally’s compass in their conduct and personal decolonization journey should include a combination of conscience, values, and a commitment to staying open to constant self-evaluation and self-correction, without ego. Decolonization is not an act of isolated self-creation. It is a messy process of relational in-the-world becoming and, as such, is often a difficult task.

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